

**Testimony before the Education Committee
In Favor of Senate Bill 1138
March 11, 2011**

Good afternoon Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Alicia Woodsby, and I am the Public Policy Director for the National Alliance on Mental Illness, or NAMI-CT. We are the largest member organization in the state of people with mental illness and their families.

I am here to testify in support of SB 1138, "An Act Concerning The Strengthening of School Bullying Laws".

Bullying exists in Connecticut's schools, as well as beyond the schools walls with student use of electronic communications devices. It interferes with student health, safety and achievement at all grade levels. One in four Connecticut high school students—and a full 35 percent of 9th graders—were bullied at school in the past year.

Connecticut high school students who report being bullied are more likely to: lose sleep, miss school because they feel unsafe, have property stolen at school, carry a weapon to school, be depressed, and attempt suicide. The changes to the school bullying laws proposed in Senate Bill 1138, An Act Concerning The Strengthening of School Bullying Laws, are important improvements.

However, bullying is not a single, discreet issue. Rather, it is a symptom of a much larger and pervasive problem: poor school climate. Other symptoms of such a climate include, but are not limited to, school violence, suspensions and expulsions, and high student dropout and suicide rates. Creating a positive school climate is an essential part of reducing not only bullying, but also of addressing these other problems. This does not happen by accident; it requires commitment of staff, intentional policies and practices, and ongoing maintenance.

Consequently, we believe that while it is important to prevent bullying, efforts to do that must be undertaken without losing sight of the fundamental need to continue to work to bring about positive school climates. There are evidence-based strategies that work, but many schools do not use them as intended, if at all. We urge that any new initiatives that are required of school districts and the state to prevent bullying also acknowledge the importance of, and incorporate strategies to bring about, a positive school climate.

We understand that SB 1138 proposes a number of mandates on school districts and the state, and it is not clear where the money would come from to support those mandates that are unfunded. However, based on a body of research linking safe, respectful learning environments to positive student outcomes, it is reasonable to expect that promoting positive school climate and preventing bullying in Connecticut schools will result in: (1) the reduction in dropout and suspensions; (2) improved student health and academic achievement; (3) the narrowing of the achievement gap; (4) a decrease in crime; and (5) a better prepared workforce.

Thank you for your time. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.